

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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A GOSPEL OF THE SOIL*

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Last summer I found myself speeding over the rails on a Great Northern air conditioned train, the Empire Builder. The name of the train, together with the comforts within and certain contrasts outside my comfortable car, induced sober retrospect. I had never given it much thought but as a boy, I suppose I was something of a western pioneer. My family moved from Connecticut to St. Paul, Minnesota, before there was a railroad west of the Twin Cities. I can remember watching "covered wagons" and "prairie schooners," followed by long lines of flocks, herds and people afoot and on horseback, wending their weary way up one of the main streets of that city, very much as Abraham must have gone out of Ur of the Chaldees. Now two other railroads parallel the Great Northern, traversing the hundreds of miles lying between St. Paul and the Pacific coast.

I never tire of looking out from car windows and, gazing upon the speeding landscape, I could but notice all sorts of changes time had wrought upon the face of the land. For I could remember that western country when it was a comparative wilderness, and when its life was essentially pioneer. And I could but ask, as I looked from the train windows: Did the early pioneers play fair with the soil lying outside?

Torrid heat and awful drought prevailed in a dozen western states and, like other people, I found myself speculating as to the possible causes. I could not but wonder whether the first settlers did not have much to do with it. Doubtless most of them, like Abraham, did go west looking "for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God;" for they were an inherently religious people. But did they use rightly the lands they cleared and farmed, accepting them as a marvellous gift and heritage?

I lived in that western country in the days of "homesteading," and when elemental land-hunger had no difficulty in acquiring "free lands." It was an era of the speculator, the exploiter and the "land shark;" who lured people thither by means of every specious claim and false promise - and for revenue only. And the government apparently aided and abetted them. Its land policies "permitted a rural civilization to grow up virtually without social plan and purpose," and one "characterized by a haphazard and community-less manner of living." Our government has never been a true guardian of the soil. Matchless prairies were everywhere plowed under, destroying native sods and grasses which can never be restored. The western country had fattened buffaloes, wild horses and cattle, and innumerable game for generations; making it truly a happy hunting ground for its original owners, the Indians. But red men, buffaloes, and soils were ruthlessly slaughtered, and, again, for material ends. All land was for the sowing of crops with little or no thought taken for suiting them to particular

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regions or soils. Farming itself was for "first values," with no felt obligation to put back into the ground what was taken out of it. The ordinary custom was for a settler to acquire land, use it up, and then move on to repeat the process again and again. Gazing out of my car window, I was forced to look upon a depleted as well as upon a parched and arid countryside; and I could but wonder if we are not now reaping just what we sowed. For only the other day an eminent soil conservationist had said in my hearing that "the worst crimes which America has committed have been crimes against the soil." And another scientist has also affirmed that misuses of land are to blame for "dust bowls" in Texas; and that they also account for the "dust storms" elsewhere, which have blown the finest surface soils the world has ever known from off the very face of the continent. And during very recent days of disastrous floods, which have destroyed millions of acres of farm lands, as well as hundreds of lives, a like blame has been laid upon holders and users of the soil.

Many people last summer, in the drought stricken country, were doubting Providence, because of its seemingly cruel treatment of the western farmer. But are fat crops supplied entirely out of hand, as the old Hebrew thought, or are they conditioned by man's own use of inexorable laws of land--laws which even the Creator himself cannot set aside? All of this has lead me to wonder if there is not a Gospel of the Soil which is waiting to be discovered, preached and practiced in rural America.

- It seems to me that such a Gospel is being discovered and preached by just such institutions as this New York State College of Agriculture, and by the type of farmer being trained and supplied by them. Let us see just what is coming to pass in the farmer world.

As I looked out of my car window last summer, I was interested to watch the villagers who gathered at the railroad stations "to see the Empire Builder go through." And it pleased me even more to behold the picturesque cow-boys galloping over the open country, astride their wiry pintos or "broncs." But I must confess that I was humbled by a sight of the farmers working their lands in a blazing atmosphere, and under a pitiless sun. It made me almost ashamed of my own luxury and air-conditioned ease. The very contrast, however, set me to thinking over the way those western farmers had come. A large number of those seen from the train doubtless came from foreign lands. But the earliest settlers were mostly from New England, where I was born. Their history is worth pondering from that day to this.

The story of the world farmer must note his development from the hoe farmer, or primitive muscular type, to the modern machine farmer or "cerebral" type. One performed the farm task of "the lift and the carry" by means of the contractile human muscle, or "human engine;" while the other has transferred most of that burden to all sorts of farm machinery. "Between these two types lies the mass of the land workers in the United States." But it is the truly American farmer that intrigues me most. His development reveals a number of different types, and each one of them is a product of a successive epoch in the settlement of rural America.

I could not, of course, recall associations with the earliest type, the Pioneer Farmer, for he lived on the Atlantic coast long before my own ancestors landed upon the shores of Massachusetts. But history and biography are filled with descriptions of the earliest pioneers who pushed out from coast settlements into the unbroken forests, and of later ones who led the van of every advancing frontier. The arduous work of felling the forests, subduing the soil and fighting the Indians, made of the pioneer the hyper-individualist of history. He also became a "traditional farmer," who was "set in his own ways of doing things," which

ways he handed down to be imitated by his children. This type of farmer has always found it hard to realize that "beyond and above individualism there is something higher--mutualism."

After the pioneer came the Householder or Land-farmer. He was busy making the new West, when I came to it as a boy. My memory can recall him. This farmer no longer lived alone, but first with neighbors in a clearing and later upon his own farm. The family became his unit of interest and value instead of the individual, and with him there came into existence "the finest family the world has ever seen"--the American farm family. This farm family has made the greatest biological, sociological, moral and spiritual contributions to the total life of the nation. And with it originated the family-farm, which still persists as characteristic of America.

A third type of farmer to develop was the Speculator and Exploiter, a product of the increasingly materialistic age. Dollars and cents are his passion, and he is absorbed in land prices rather than by real land values; together with the unearned increment. He is also dominated by the get-rich-quick and get-something-for-nothing philosophy of life; and seldom refers to his farm as a home, but boasts of his lands as worth so many dollars an acre. He represents the era of breaking of home ties, of abnormal drifts to the cities, of abandoned churches, and of loss of neighborhood. A farm which has supported one family comfortably is made to support two; while absentee landlord and farm tenant consider it a mutual necessity to rob and ruin the land. Speculation and exploitation go hand in hand, and they invariably spoil both the farmer and the soil. This type of farmer is to blame for much of the misery upon farms seen from my car window.

My air-conditioned retrospect may seem to be a gloomy one. But there is a rift in the clouds. A fourth type of farmer is even now in the making. He is the husbandman, who has been described as a farmer who is "married to the land." This farmer treats the soil with much of the consideration shown toward his wife and family; for his unit of interest and value is land itself, and after that the whole farmer class that works thereon. The husbandman is coming to believe that while he may hold a legal title to his farm, he does not really own it. For "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and all land is holy earth. Therefore, to mine the earth, or to run out the soil, or to leave a farm in worse condition than when it was acquired, is just as much a sin as to break any or all the commands of the Decalogue. For the husbandman feels himself duty bound to think of generations yet unborn who must live on the land after he has done with it. And still further, farming is a co-partnership, and even a co-creatorship with God, in their behalf. It is also a partnership between man and the soil, to the end of making the earth yield both her full and rightful increase. Duty demands "putting all parties concerned into the picture," of those who own, work and benefit by the land.

Verily, here is the discovery and practice of something akin to a Gospel of the Soil. All day long, while humming over the rails, that need has haunted me--the need for such a gospel. I asked myself: Is there really such a thing? Where can it be found? As a final preparation before seeking my berth for the night, I turned to a small pocket edition which I carry with me. It was a Bible, which incidentally has an unappreciated rural bias and content; for it rests upon the scientific dictum: "underneath all, the land." The pages opened to the book of origins, and first chapters of Genesis. There I found a vivid picture, whose details certainly give beginnings for a needed gospel of the soil.

The ancient record declares that in the beginning God made the earth, and pronounced it very good. The thrills that I had been experiencing all day

long, as I looked out of my car window, were also felt by Jehovah way back at the dawn of creation. And we had been sharing them together. But one sentence in holy writ seemed to me to contain a real pathos: "but there was not a man to till the soil." A negro poet has interpreted that situation: "but God said I am lonely still...I'll make me a man." God wanted a companion. And that companion must be created "in his own image," made "a living soul;" he must be capable of thinking God's own thoughts with and after him--especially those thoughts contained in the beneficent but also inexorable laws of land. God also desired a partner. Nay more, he must have one; for he had started something he could not finish, alone. God might make a world, but he could not till the soil. At this point emerges the sublime dignity and worth of all those who work upon the land. For the very first need felt and voiced by the Creator after he had made the earth and all its animate life, was for a farmer. And this man was to be a co-operator. For without his assistance, the ground would not only refuse to yield its full increase, it would also revert to type. It would return again to primeval chaos, for that is Nature's way when left to her own unaided devices. Man's primary and greatest responsibility, under God, and in behalf of human beings, has always been to care for the earth. Holy Writ declares that he must dress it--plow, harrow, sow, cultivate, and harvest; that he must also keep it--guard it against pests, erosions, ravages by wind or flood, disasters of heat and cold, and from all wicked misuses and abuses by man.

Here truly is a Gospel of the Soil, which is good sociology and sound economics, as well as religion. Its preaching and practice will secure right care, development and uses of holy earth. For the creative pattern and intent are made evident. Farming is rightly a three-fold cooperative. God, man and the soil are to work together with mutual interests and rights in mind. Each cooperator is absolutely essential to the other, and only a harmonious and efficient working together can vindicate the divine expectation. If one member fails or wrongs the other in this team play on the soil, the destiny of the Universe will not be utterly thwarted. But it will be retarded--and that is sin.
